

Harriet Duerre

And, Before

Once he gave me wild bear rides.

Me, sitting on his back, six feet in the air

Him, crawling on the floor

growling and snapping at my dangling legs

When his muscles ached he

stretched out and gave me

a nickel to walk up and down on his back

bouncing gently on the sore spots

Holding his hand I felt empty places

where fingers used to be

He was part of a legion of farm children

losing fingers or limbs to a hay baler or combine

He never glanced at my report cards

or seemed interested in my plans

I wanted him to be like other fathers

who came to watch school plays or Sunday School programs

But coming home from an afternoon of fishing

he brought my mother wild violets in his worm can

If any babies visited he held them in his strong arms

And talked in a silly squeaky voice
When I left home he wrote me a letter
saying that he missed me

Then one summer evening his heart stopped
In an eye blink he was gone
Before I asked him the questions
Before I knew I missed him
Before I said I love you.